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ABSTRACT

A total of 28 middle class preschool children ranging in age from 3.5 to 5.5 years participated in a study designed to identify characteristic behaviors of children differing in their social acceptance by peers. Indexes of social acceptance and rejection were obtained through a peer nomination procedure based on queries about most and least preferred playmates. Acceptance and rejection scores were used to assign subjects to four social status groups: popular, rejected, controversial, and neglected. Each child's interaction in a setting promoting social play was observed and videotaped on three occasions for a total of 60 minutes. Children interacted in triads: on one occasion the target child was an "intruder" into a dyad, and twice the target child was a member of a dyad intruded upon. Three aspects of social interaction were coded and analyzed: (1) children's direction of communication toward others, (2) the types of initiations children made to each other, and (3) the types of responses children made to the initiations of others. For each of the four social status groups, distinct patterns of social interaction and communication were found. Results indicated patterns of social interaction leading to social acceptance, rejection, and isolation. (Implications of the findings for remedial intervention by teachers are discussed.) (RH)

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SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE:

HOW CHILDREN ACHIEVE IT

AND

HOW TEACHERS CAN HELP

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Social Acceptance: How Young Children Achieve It,

and How Teachers Can Help

Every preschool teacher has faced the problem of trying to help children who consistently have difficulty getting involved in positive interactions with other children. Some children are continually rebuffed and rejected by their peers. Others are ignored, their pleas of "Can I play?" falling on deaf ears. What can teachers do to help such children?

Surprisingly little information on this question is available to teachers. Guidance books generally deal with the importance of adult-child relationships in the development of self-control and self-esteem, but rarely discuss the importance of successful peer relations or suggest guidance strategies that teachers can use to help foster children's social acceptance.

Yet it is generally agreed that peer interactions serve important functions in the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. Research confirms that peer interaction facilitates the development of moral values, communication skills, and the ability to handle aggressive feelings (Hartup, 1977). Peers also provide each other with emotional support in stressful situations (Freud & Dann, 1951), and facilitate cognitive development through direct instruction and through enriching imaginative play (Asher, Renshaw, & Hymel, 1982). In fact research evidence indicates that children with inadequate peer relations are at risk for a variety of mental health and social and emotional adjustment problems later in life (Cowen et al., 1973; Kohlberg, LaCross, & Ricks, 1972; Roff, Sells, & Golder, 1972).

It is easy to understand why this should be so. In our own experience, we have found that preschool children who are not socially accepted generally develop low self-esteem and expectations of rejection.

These exceptions often lead to negative social interaction patterns. For example, a child who is often rejected may approach others with aggression or hostility, or may withdraw from others to avoid the pain of rejection. These negative social interaction patterns generally lead to further social isolation, which perpetuates low self-esteem and reduces the child's opportunity to practice and thus improve social skills.

We, as teachers of young children, are in a position to break this cycle of social rejection and isolation. But in order to do so, we need to know what kinds of behavior distinguish socially accepted children from those who are rejected or ignored. For this reason, we conducted a study to examine this question. From the results of our study, we will suggest guidelines that teachers could use to help children who are not socially accepted.

PROCEDURE

The subjects of our study were 28 middle-class preschool children enrolled in two classes at the University of Texas Child and Family Laboratory. They ranged from 3½ to 5½ years old.

To measure children's social acceptance, we presented each child with photographs of all the children in his or her class. After making sure that they could identify the photographs, we asked the children to look carefully at all the photographs and then to "show me which child you like to play with the most." We asked this two more times, so that each child would choose a total of three accepted children. We then calculated a social acceptance score for each child by assigning the child points for each time he or she was chosen by another child (8 points for a first choice, 6 for a second choice, and 4 for a third choice, and then summing these points.

Social rejection was measured in a similar fashion. After we

removed the photographs of the accepted children, we asked children to "show me which child you don't like to play with much." This was also repeated twice so that each child would choose three rejected children. Social rejection scores were then calculated in the same way as social acceptance scores.

We then used social acceptance and social rejection scores to divide children into four social status groups, following previous investigations (i.e., Coie, Coppotelli, & Dodge, 1982). Children with high social acceptance and low social rejection were designated as popular, those with high social rejection and low social acceptance were designated as rejected, those with high social acceptance and high social rejection were designated as controversial, and those with low social acceptance and low social rejection were designated as neglected.

But how did the groups differ in their social interaction skills? To find out, we grouped children from the same classroom into same sex groups of three. We observed the children's social interaction by taking two members of the triad into a small room containing props designed to elicit social play, and then videotaping them with a hidden camera.

After ten minutes, the teacher brought the third child (the "intruder") into the room, and we videotaped the interaction of the three children for 10 more minutes. This procedure enabled us to examine differences in the social interaction skills used by the four social status groups to enter ongoing play situations, and to assess how this potentially stressful but common situation affected children's communication skills. Each child was observed three times: once as the intruder and twice as part of the original pair. For all three sessions, each child was with a different pair of children.

Later, each session was completely transcribed, and all verbal and

nonverbal communications were recorded. Three aspects of social interaction were coded and analyzed: 1) children's direction of communication to others, 2) the types of initiations children made to each other, and 3) the types of responses children made to the initiations of others.

RESULTS

For each of the four social status groups, we found distinct patterns of social interaction and communication.

Popular children

The popular children were the most efficient of the four groups in their ability to direct their communications to others. First of all, they clearly indicated which other child they were speaking to, either by addressing the child by name (for example, "Hey Dawn, want to play dolls?"), or by establishing eye contact or touching the other child. This skill became particularly important when all three children were together. When more than two children are playing together, as of course is generally the case in the natural setting of the preschool, social initiations that are not clearly addressed are more likely to be ignored.

Relative to neglected and rejected children, popular children were more inclined to direct communications to both of the other children in the play situation fairly equally, rather than focusing heavily on just one of the other children. Often, when a popular child was in a play situation with two less popular children, the popular child became the "center of attention", with the other two children speaking almost exclusively to the popular child, while the popular child evenly divided his or her attention between the other two. Popular children were especially careful about dividing their attention evenly between both playmates when they were the intruders. It was as though they knew that attending to all participants of an ongoing play situation would minimize their

chances of being rejected by any of them.

The following example, in which Heather, a popular child, is playing with Susan and Mary, who are less socially accepted, illustrates both the clear direction of the popular child's initiations and her ability to divide her attention between both of her playmates. Heather turned and looked directly at Mary, saying, "Looky, that's your telephone." She then turned to Susan and said, "Susan, let's put the keys right here." When Susan didn't respond, Heather continued, "Susan, we need to put them back, okay?" Heather then turned back to Mary, and looking directly at her, made a play suggestion, "No, darlin', you be the baby, okay?"

The popular children had a wide range of social initiation strategies at their disposal, and they were able to adapt them to the individual interests and needs of different playmates. For example, one very popular child used nonverbal initiations 75% of the time when playing with a child who spoke very little English, although she almost always initiated verbally with other playmates. This degree of flexibility was not found in the other social status groups.

In responding to the initiations of others, popular children were more attentive than less popular children. They consistently responded to initiations that required a response, such as requests and suggestions, but they also tended to respond even to initiations that did not necessarily require a response. Popular children were <u>not</u> consistently more likely than other children to join in with every social initiation they received, that is, to carry the initiation one step further. But they did try to at least acknowledge the communications directed toward them. This is illustrated in the following example, in which Allison, a popular child, and Diane, a controversial child, are busily taking care of their baby dolls:

Diane: The baby wants to drink her bottle.

Allison: Okay.

Diane: (After feeding the doll) Now, that's done.

Allison: Hmmm.

Diane: Now I've got to dust the walls, of course.

Allison: Good.

In this situation, a third child was also present. Notice that Allison acknowledged Diane's comments even though they were not clearly directed to any particular child.

Interestingly, we found that popular children were just as likely as other children to reject other children's requests and play suggestions. But when they did, they were more likely than other children to offer a reason for the rejection, or to suggest an alternatives. For example, one popular child who was told, "You be the baby" responded, "No, I'm too big (Reason). We could both be mothers and these could be our babies (Alternative)." All in all, the popular children seemed to realize the social value of attending to others.

Controversial children

In many ways, the controversal children were like the popular children. In directing their communications, they clearly indicated to whom they were speaking, and they made and received just as many communications as the popular children. In fact, their communication skills differed from those of the popular children only when they were intruders. As intruders, controversial children were just as likely as rejected children to ignore the initiations of others. Instead, they seemed to focus more intensely on their own needs, as indicated by a considerable increase in the number of requests they made. For example, Susan, a

controversal child, entered a situation in which Patty and Jane were pretending they were getting married. Susan approached Patty and asked, "Will you help me put this in my hair." After Patty did so, Susan asked, "Will you help ut this w.ch on?" Again Patty complied, and Susan went on, "Who's gonna marry me?", and without leaving time for a response, "How do you get a watch moved?"

Thus, although controversial children seemed to have good communication skills when already part of a play situation, entering an ongoing play situation seemed to be more difficult to them than it was for popular children. Whereas popular children became more attentive to others in such situations, controversial children focused more on themselves, and as a result, often had more difficulty entering ongoing play.

Neglected children

Neglected children were more likely than other children to play by themselves. They made and received fewer social initiations than any other group. They were also more likely than other children to use what Piaget (1969) has called egocentric speech or speech to the self. For example, one neglected child took some play money from a box, stuffed it in his pockets, and spent several minutes walking around the room, patting his pockets, and repeating softly to himself, "Money, I got money. Money." When neglected children did initiate play suggestions to others, they often did not clearly direct their initiations. For example, a neglected child might stand by the table, look at the basket of plastic fruit, and say quietly, with her head down, "We could eat this fruit." Such initiations were often ignored, perhaps because the other children could not be sure the neglected children were not still talking to themselves.

The neglected children seemed to experience more difficulty as intruders than any of the other groups. When entering an ongoing play situation, they became even less communicative than usual. In one extreme case, a neglected child who had made 103 initiations during one of the triadic play situations in which she was not an intruder, made only 6 initiations during the session in which she was an intruder. Neglected children also became less clear in directing their initiations, and when they did direct them clearly, they tended to focus heavily on just one of the other children, ignoring the other one. In such cases, they seemed to try to align themselves with whichever child they felt most comfortable.

Other neglected intruders spent several minutes just watching the ongoing play before attempting an initiation. This often proved to be effective in eventually gaining acceptance. For example, one neglected boy simply sat in a chair and watched, or passively followed the instructions given by the other two boys, for about 8 minutes. Finally, he seemed to figure out that their play was centering around a theme of preparing for "bad guys" who were soon to arrive. So he called out "Hey, guess what, guys? I just heard that the sharpshooter escaped from jail!" This initiation was enthusiastically accepted.

Overall, neglected children seemed aware of the communications made by other children, but were less comfortable about joining into social interactions than were other children. Perhaps they feared rejection to the point that they would rather be ignored than rejected. Their uneasiness about social interaction seemed especially pronounced when they needed to enter ongoing play situations.

Rejected children

Rejected children made as many social initiations as popular and

controversal children, but they received fewer initiations than children in these groups. There seemed to be two major reasons for their social rejection--lack of attention to others, and limitations in their social initiation repertoires.

Their lack of attention to others was indicated by a very high proportion of nondirected initiations--higher than that of the neglected children. Whereas neglected children failed to direct initiations primarily when they were intruders, rejected children were equally nondirective in both conditions. They did not seem to perceive the intruder condition as problematic, since they showed basically the same social interaction patterns in both conditions. Rejected children also ignored the initiations of others more than any other group, a further indication of their lack of attention to others.

Limitations in the social skill repetoires of rejected children is a second factor that may contribute to the social difficulties experienced by this group. Not all rejected children were limited in the same way. Some initiated social interaction in an inflexible, stereotyped fashion. Although they usually had the same range of initiation types as other children, they tended to overuse particular initiation routines without adapting them to different situations and different children. For example, Mark, a rejected boy, grabbed for a toy and said, "Gimme that! Gimme that!" Tom refused, and gave Mark reasons ("I'm using this now. I'll be done in a minute") and alternatives ("There's another one over there"), but Mark persisted in trying to grab the toy and saying, "Gimme that! I need that one!"

In contrast, the popular children were able to flexibly adapt their initiations in order to achieve their goals. When popular Allison wanted to obtain a wig from Karen, she first playfully snatched it off Karen's

head and proclaimed, "I want to wear this!" Karen screamed, "Quit! I had it first!", so Allison returned it and wandered off. In a moment she returned and said, "You know, Karen, I almost didn't recognize you with that ugly wig on." Karen promptly removed the wig.

Some of the rejected children varied their initiation repertoires, but did not relate their initiations to ongoing play themes. One rejected child in particular, Fred, made bizarre initiations that the other children could not possibly have understood. While at no time looking directly at either of the other children, he said, "Look at the box" (it was not clear what box he was referring to), and then "So busy, hey, he's so busy, 'cause he's busy". Next he made buzzing noises for a while, then said, "All the blocks are over there." There appeared to be no connection between what he was saying and what the other children were doing. In fact, after repeated attempts to engage Fred in play, one of his playmates finally suggested, "Fred, maybe we could play lunch. You do know how to eat lunch, don't you?"

Perhaps rejected children have difficulty processing social information. This may be why they seemed unaware of the social initiations of others, and why they often seemed unable to adapt their social initiations to those of their playmates. Some of the rejected children, particularly Mark, were considerably more successful when playing with only one other child than when playing with more than one. Although he tended to use stereotyped initiations even when playing with only one other child, the other child was generally able to adapt to Mark, and they got along quite well. In one situation, for example, Mark initiated a game with Jack in which he would point out an object in the room and say, "What's this chair doing here?", "What's this coffee pot doing here?", and so on. Jack joined in, answering, "I don't know! But what's

this fruit doing here?" But when the third child entered, Mark fell back upon using rough physical contact as an initiation strategy. This seemed to be the one type of social initiation that would ensure a predictable response for Mark.

We should note, however, that we did not find aggressive behavior to be a general characteristic of the rejected children. Instead, rejected children were characterized by using inappropriate, inflexible initiations that were not related to the ongoing play. For some rejected children, like Mark, such initiations included rough physical contact, especially when more than one other child was playing and it became more difficult to attend to the complex social situation that resulted. Other rejected children, like Fred, never used any aggressive initiations, but made fewer attempts than Mark to attend to others and to ensure that they could comprehend his initiations. Also, aggressive behaviors were used from time to time by each of the other three social status groups, including popular children.

Although general patterns of interaction can be discerned for each of the four social status groups, considerable individual variations existed within each of the groups. Not all popular children have each of the distinctive social interaction patterns that we described. This is true of the other groups as well. Also, from time to time, even the most popular child may be excluded from social play. For these reasons, the strategies that teachers can use to help children who are not socially accepted may be applicable to any child who wishes to gain social acceptance in a given situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR GUIDANCE

The results of our study give some indication of which patterns of social interaction lead to social acceptance and which lead to rejection

and isolation. Teachers can be alert for such patterns and can then guide children toward using communication strategies associated with social acceptance. It is only through careful and methodical observation of a child's interaction in actual social situations that the teacher can gain insight into which behaviors are contributing to the child's problem.

While observing a child who seems to have problems being accepted by peers, teachers might look for the following:

1) Does the child's success in social interactions seem to deteriorate when he or she interacts with more than one child at one time? That is, does the child become less responsive to others, or use less adaptive interaction strategies?
2) Does the child seem intimidated about entering ongoing social interaction, and withdraw from groups that are already engaged in play?
3) Does the child tend to use stereotyped routines to initiate social interactions, rather than flexibly adapting to individual children and situations?
4) Does the child have a repertoire of play themes that are meaningful to other children, or are they highly idiosyncratic?
5) Does the child clearly indicate to whom he or she is speaking?
6) Does the child focus heavily on just one other child, ignoring others?
7) Does the child attend to the initiations of others by at least acknowledging them?
8) When rejecting the ideas of others, does the child offer reasons or alternatives?

If a child seems to have difficulty interacting with two or more children at a time, as Mark did, one possible strategy would be to give

that child an opportunity to "practice" social skills with only one other child, away from the confusing stimulation of the whole group. Perhaps a special activity could be arranged, in which the rejected child and a child with very effective communication skills could participate by themselves. Choose an activity that both children have enjoyed in the past, and which is likely to lead to cooperative interaction. For example, a special dramatic play area, or a sand or water table with interesting toys, could be set up in a private area. If possible, arrange to have a teacher nearby to unobtrusively guide the child toward successful communication strategies when necessary. Such a one-to-one situation would enable the rejected child to attend to the other child without distraction, and to pick up alternative, more adaptive communication strategies from the more socially skilled playmate. Most importantly, experiencing successful social interaction should increase rejected children's self-esteem, leading them to view themselves as likable children who will be accepted by their peers.

Of course, it may be logistically impossible for many teachers to arrange special supervised play sessions for individual children, due to staff and space limitations. If so, the teacher might suggest to the rejected child's parents that they invite particular individual children to their homes. The teacher might also provide private areas within the classroom that allow children to interact in small groups, away from the sometimes stressful noise and confusion of the whole classroom. A loft, for example, would be ideal because only a few children can occupy it at one time, and although it gives children a feeling of privacy, it also can be easily supervised. Other less costly possibilities might include a large cardboard box with windows cut out, or a puppet stage with curtains.

Children who appear to be intimidated by entering an ongoing play situation, like many of the neglected children in our study, might also profit from the opportunity to engage in one-to-one social situations. Because they are more likely to be accepted in such situations, they should gain confidence in their ability to successfully initiate interaction. Teachers could also help such children by noting when they seem to want to enter a group, and guiding them toward initiation strategies that will be accepted. As we found in our study, initiation strategies that focus on the needs of the entering child are rarely successful. The commonly suggested strategy, "Ask them if you can play" is rarely effective for this reason. The teacher should instead try to help the entering child focus on the interests and ongoing activities of the play group they wish to enter, rather than on their own need to become involved. In effect, children should not ask what the play group can do for them, but what they can contribute to the play group. To this end, the teacher might suggest, "Let's listen to what they're doing here. What are they playing? What could you do to help with that?"

The teacher should not draw attention to the fact that the child is trying to enter ongoing play, but simply help him or her find a way to enter it smoothly and casually. Waiting and watching is not necessarily a problem in gaining social acceptance. In fact, as we saw in the case of the neglected boy who waited several minutes before breaking in with a very appropriate and enthusiastically accepted initiation, it often makes a great deal of sense. Often, the simple physical presence of a child (if not disruptive to the play) will result in some sort of play invitation before too long.

If a child uses inflexible, stereotyped routines to initiate interaction, or uses bizarre, idiosyncratic initiations that others

cannot understand, the teacher could guide the child toward adapting his or her initiations to the ongoing play. For example, the teacher might say to Mark, when he persisted in trying to grab the toy from Tommy, "Listen to what Tommy is saying. Why doesn't he want to give you that toy now?" The teacher might then try to guide Mark into generating alternative means of obtaining the toy or alternative ways of playing, for example, "Do you really need to play with this toy? Okay, what are some ways you could get it? Can you think of something else you and Tommy could do together?".

If Mark was not able to generate alternatives, but persisted in demanding that Tommy give him the toy, the teacher might need to suggest alternatives. Later, the teacher might present Mark with similar problem-solving opportunities, for example, by giving a puppet show in which two puppets are arguing over a toy. In such a situation, Mark would not be distracted by emotional involvement, and might therefore be more successful in problem solving. Shure and Spivak's (1979) preschool intervention program, which is aimed at fostering social competence by helping children gain facility in generating alternative solutions to social problems, may be especially beneficial for children like Mark, who tend to initiate and respond in a fixed, inflexible fashion.

Children who use bizarre initiations, like Fred, may be guided toward the realization that their initiations do not make sense to others and are not relevant to the ongoing play. The teacher might try to get children like Fred to clarify themselves, for example, "You said "He's so busy--who is busy?," or "Can you tell Jack what you're doing? I don't think he knows why you're buzzing like that." Teacher could also try to draw such children's attention to the ongoing play of the other children, as described earlier.

In all of these examples, the teacher functions as an interpreter, helping rejected or neglected children realize how other children interpret, or fail to interpret, their communications. This sort of guidance strategy, geared toward helping children realize the consequences of their ineffective communication patterns, may also be effectively applied to children who do not clearly direct their communications to others, who repeatedly ignore others, or who reject the ideas of others without giving reasons or alternatives. For example, teachers could help children who do not clearly direct their communications by asking, "Who are you talking to, Fred?", or by saying, "I don't think Jack knows you're talking to him. How can you let him know?" If children frequently ignore the initiations of others, the teacher could say, "Mary is asking you something," or "Did you hear Mary's idea?" Similarly, the teacher could guide children toward giving reasons or alternatives when rejecting the play ideas of others by asking, 'Can you tell David why you don't want to swing?" or "Can you tell David what you could both do instead?"

Besides guiding rejected or neglected children toward understanding how others interpret their social behaviors, teachers can also help such children by interpreting their behavior to others. For example, they might say, "Mark pushed you because he wants to play with you. That's his way of trying to be your friend. Maybe you can let him know how you would like him to play here. What could he do?" In this way, the teacher could help the socially rejected or neglected child both by helping the other children to understand the child, and by guiding the child toward using more effective initiations and responses and thereby increasing his opportunities for successful social interaction.

A few words of caution are in order at this point. First, we

believe that it is important not to force children to play with a rejected or neglected child against their wishes. Rather than resulting in a successful social experience for the neglected or rejected child, this may in fact lead to increased resentment, and further rejection, of the child. As much as possible, teachers could guide rejected and neglected children toward interaction with others who are most likely to accept and interact positively with them, and could intervene when necessary in order to maximize their chances for successful social experiences.

Secondly, we are not advocating that teachers intervene with all children who are not popular and not instantly accepted. Indeed, many rejected and neglected children need minimal teacher assistance. They may be quite content to play with only one or two close friends, or even to play alone much of the time. Many children prefer solitary or one-to-one play, and younger preschoolers may not be developmentally capable of social interaction with large groups of children. For these reasons, we suggest that teachers step in only when the child's lack of acceptance is a source of concern <u>for the child</u>, resulting in emotional stress or loss of self-esteem.

Finally, we must emphasize that we do not have all the answers. There is no "how to" list for guidance that could possibly encompass all possible combinations of interaction patterns and specific situational variables. Guidance must be individualized, and thus there are as many possible guidance strategies for dealing with lack of social acceptance as there are different types of children and different types of situations. We have suggested some that have worked for us, and we would like to hear from other teachers of young children concerning strategies that they have found to be helpful in facilitating children's social acceptance.

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